I Wore The Mask Up High

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I Wore The Mask Up High

by Trekkiehood

Summary

“Buck!” The shaking brought just enough clarity for him to hear his name. “Gale!” This time shouted directly in his ear. He flinched away and only then realized how accelerated his breathing had become. “Breathe Gale. Come on.”

Gale's mask finally starts to crack after a run in with some guards. Bucky is there to help paste it back together.

Notes

"I wore the mask up high on a daylight run
That held my face in its clammy hand" - The War Was in Color by Carbon Leaf

Hey guys! This is a fic I've been teasing on Tumblr for a bit and finally got the time to finish. It's one of those that was hard to put an ending on because it could have gone so many different ways. I think I'm mostly happy with it tho. If any of the German is wrong, I used google translate. I've studied German some but not enough to understand the structure of everything.

A quick note on the title, I'm taking a double meaning for this title. Because while the original song is talking about pilots during WWII (which applies wonderfully to Gale) it also applies to Gale feeling like he needs to wear a mask in front of his men.

Anyway, mind the tags and I hope you enjoy!

Standard disclaimer: these are based off of the characters from the show and are not intended to reflect the actual people

See the end of the work for more notes

Buck felt the tension before he saw the crowd. As he wormed his way through the uneasy prisoners he heard the murmurs and eventually the angry shouts be lobbed at one of the guards.

He had no idea what this lieutenant was upset about but he was about to get himself shot. The German sergeant took a step forward and Gale knew they were already working with borrowed time.

“Lieutenant!” He barked, making it to the front of the crowd. “Stand down!” It didn’t matter what the argument was about. It didn’t matter who was right. What mattered was keeping the guards from using their guns or fists on one of his men.

The man, a boy really, they seemed to get younger with every shipment of prisoners, didn’t listen, rearing his fist back.

Gale didn’t have time to think, he grabbed the boy’s wrist, yanking him away from the guard. The lieutenant fell back and was caught by a few of the guys who had gathered around “Get him to his barrack, now.” he ordered the first man who dared to make eye contact with him.

They nodded, pulling the stunned man back through the crowd. Buck had only managed to take a single step before he felt a hand grasp his left arm. He fought the initial urge to fight back, freezing instead. A gasp ran through the men at the same moment he felt the cool barrel of a rifle level against his right temple. A second guard had joined and apparently wanted an example.

Gale didn’t move. He barely breathed. But he saw the men before him and knew he couldn’t risk showing fear right now. He had to focus on keeping the men calm and not getting shot. A few men broke away from the group and he could only imagine they were running to grab the Colonel. Hopefully he could get here before things escalated even further.

Finally, he slowly held his free arm out, palm forward and clear. His left arm was still tightly grasped by the initial guard and he didn’t want to risk being accused of an act of aggression. He wasn’t sure what to do. There seemed nothing to do except to wait and see the outcome of his fate. The Germans were speaking to each other and maybe he could have picked up some of the words if he wasn’t so focused on keeping his breathing even.

A commotion had broken out and Gale wasn’t sure if that was good or

bad. Then he saw the cause. Bucky had pushed his way to the front of the crowd, followed closely by Benny. His eyes blazed with anger but that wasn't what Buck saw. Gale saw the fear. The panic. The grief.

Buck watched him, begging with his eyes for him to not do something stupid. He should have known better. With a growl, Bucky lunged forward. DeMarco grabbed him around the waist, yanking him back and frantically whispering something in his ear. He wasn't sure what Benny was saying but after a final shake, Bucky stopped fighting to get free and was released.

All his attention had come to rest on Bucky. He should have known better. Gale couldn't hold back the surprised grunt when his left arm was twisted backwards and pressed against his back. The guard was going to break his arm. It may not even be intentional. Gale hated how weak he had become. How fragile, brittle, his time in the stalag had made him. He could feel the bones wanting to give under pressure.

The anger sparked in John's eyes, he grit his teeth and seemed to be using every ounce of control he had left to not lunge forward. Benny's hand snaked up, grasping hold of Bucky just in case that self control broke.

Another hand gripped his upper arm in a bruising hold, bringing his attention away from his friend and back to his current predicament. "You are very pretty, ja?" The words whispered accompanied by the hot breath on his neck caused Gale's mask to slip, if only for a second. His breath caught, eyes seeking out Bucky. "We could have so much fun with you." A small pause, the crushing grip on his wrist tightening. "But shooting you now would also be fun. Such difficult decisions."

Something in John's face shifted and Gale knew he had to reel in his panic, control himself. Bucky couldn't come in guns blazing to save him. Not this time. But he would try. If Gale couldn't manage to tamper the panicked glint in his eyes…

He couldn't show weakness. He had to bring his breathing back under control. The guard behind him laughed at his obvious distress.

Slow breaths.

In through the nose for four.

Out through the mouth for four.

Don’t look at Bucky.

In through the nose for four.

Out through the mouth for four.

Look anywhere else but at Bucky.

“Entscheidungen.” The man with the gun said with a chuckle. He may have brought his breathing under control, but he couldn’t hide his pounding heart. Not from the man who pressed up against him. Holding him in a way that made every fiber of his being want to lash out.

Buck wasn’t an idiot. He knew how some of the guards looked at him a little too long. It made him cautious to walk alone in less populated areas. To avoid one-on-one interactions with any of the guards, just in case.

But now there was no avoiding it. The thought lingered in the back of his mind that this whole ordeal had been planned, strategized. They knew he would stand up for his men. Goad any kid into a fight and Gale would be there ready to play peacemaker. Ready to take the fall and whatever punishment they deemed fit.

Against his will his eyes returned to Bucky. He didn't know what his own eyes said, felt too disconnected from himself to control anything except the steady breaths he had to force, but he saw Bucky's jaw tighten.

He tried to beg with his eyes. Plead with him to not do anything stupid. To not let Gale’s fate dictate his own. But he knew Buck wouldn’t listen.

John’s eyes only blazed with fury and a desperation that scared Gale. It would spill over soon. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen soon.

“What is going on here?!”

Buck’s eyes flicked away to where Colonel Alkire was marching towards them with authoritative steps. A few men followed behind, clearly out of breath, but not stopping until they personally saw that Major Cleven was still alive.

Nails dug into the flesh in his arm, but the Germans remained silent.

“Well?!” The Colonel demanded again, now standing only a few feet to their right. “I assume you have a good reason for treating one of my officers like that?!” The Colonel tried not to throw his weight around unless it was unavoidable, trying to save it for when it was really necessary. Buck was thankful that he was deemed necessary.

“He should learn to watch his tongue.” The sergeant behind him hissed, but released his arm.

Gale’s breath caught at the sudden change in position, but he steadied himself, slowly bringing his left arm up to match the right. In doing so, his weight shifted, causing the barrel of the gun to be pressed more firmly against his temple.

Fine.

If they were going to kill him, better for them to do it quickly. With one bullet. He had no interest in living out the war in some Kraut hospital or having to be put down like a dog.

All eyes were on the Colonel, but when Buck’s eyes flitted away he saw that John was only looking at him. Their eyes met and Gale knew with sudden certainty that the second the gun went off, Bucky would be dead too. DeMarco’s hand wrapped around his arm wouldn’t be able to hold him back. Nothing would be.

A riot would break out. Chaos. More men would die.

The Colonel knew that too.

He stepped forward until he was at Buck’s right shoulder, inches from the man with the rifle.His voice was low, but held no room for disagreement. “If you pull that trigger I won’t be able to control them. Neither will you.”

“Lass ihn gehen.” The sergeant behind him did not sound happy as he ordered his friend to let Gale go.

“Nein, das ist unsere Veränderung. Er gehört uns!”

Buck’s German wasn’t perfect. Far from it. But he understood enough. It wasn’t the “no” that had his eyes breaking from Bucky’s to watch the Colonel’s response. It was the, “He’s ours.”

“Then you can explain to the Commandant and the Red Cross why there was a riot that took out half your prisoners. If you survive it.

Because you'll be the first one they go for." It was not the normal imposing voice of the Colonel, but one that commanded the same respect. He wasn't bluffing. They all knew it was true.

The only answer was the same voice from behind him, "Gehen!"

A harsh pressure on his back had him stumbling forward. The sharp stinging on the side of his head flashed and then went numb with the intense ringing that seemed to come from inside of him. His knees failed and his outstretched arms were the only thing that kept his face from losing the war with gravity.

For a moment it was like living in the space between a heartbeat. The world, still around him. The only sound, blood rushing in his ears and his own labored breathing. He blinked, hearing muffled voices grow louder. He should know what they were saying. The voices felt meant for him. But he couldn't comprehend any of it. A warm sticky substance was dripping down the side of his face, gathering in the corner of his right eye, but he didn't think his shaking arms would be able to reach up and wipe it away. Or if they would be able to hold him up for much longer.

Then the world came screeching into a painful clarity. A hand was on his back, words all around him. So much light and color and sound. It was like he was trying to focus a camera while the radio played at full volume.

He was surrounded, his men having pressed themselves between their fallen major and the Germans. The claustrophobia warred with a deep gratitude and love for them.

"Buck!" The shaking brought just enough clarity for him to hear his name. "Gale!" This time shouted directly in his ear. He flinched away and only then realized how accelerated his breathing had become. "Breathe Gale. Come on." He thought it might be nice to just lay his forehead against the ground. Yeah. That might be nice.

No.

Right.

Breathing first.

Gale closed his eyes, letting his head drop slightly.

The grip on his shirt tightened, but he ignored it, focusing on slow

breaths. He couldn't break down. He couldn't let his men see him like that. He couldn't let the Nazis win. Not today. Not ever.

"Alright," He said quietly, shaking his head. His voice was calm if not as strong as it normally was. His breathing was under control now and the ringing in his ears had died down. "Alright. I'm okay. I'm okay, John." Gale began to push himself up, Bucky quickly moving to help him. Someone else was there too, on his other side. Normally he would push away the help but he wasn't sure he would have been able to get back on his feet without it. As soon as he was standing, he shook away his friends. The first step almost caused him to stumble. "I'm alright." He assured them, stepping out of their reach. Needing to prove to himself and the others that he could stand on his own. The adrenaline was wearing off. He needed to get to the barracks now or he wasn't going to make it.

But the crowd around him was getting louder. Angry shouts mixed with conspiratorial whispers. He couldn't let this happen. Couldn't let his men die for him without cause.

"Alright!" He shouted as best he could above the crowd. The ones closest to him turned but the rest didn't seem to notice him. "Alright, fellas, listen up!" A few more looked at him, but it wasn't until Bucky let out a shrill whistle that all eyes turned. He gave his friend a small nod of appreciation before addressing the crowd. "Everything's fine. I'm okay. Nothing happened. Go to your barracks and cool off."

"You're bleeding!" Came a shout from the crowd.

Gale's hand came up to where he was only just starting to feel the sting of the cut near his hairline. "Just a scratch." He said confidently, even though he had no idea what had happened or how it had gotten there. "Don't worry about it. I'm fine, and you are too. Now cool off before something *does* happen."

This time the murmurs seemed discontented, but not on the verge of a riot. Good enough.

Buck decided to set the example, turning towards his barrack. A handkerchief was shoved in his hand by someone, probably Benny, and he held it up to his face. Bucky was close on his left side and Gale was glad as he felt the last dredges of adrenaline start to fade. Not wanting to appear weak in front of his still frustrated men, he carefully reached out and hooked two fingers into Bucky's belt loop. It steadied him enough without giving away his current state to the rest

of the men. It was also about all he could manage, his arm screaming at him with every small jostle and movement. His fingers felt clumsy and stiff.

John stepped closer, hand coming up to grip the back of Gale's shirt. He should push him away, reassure his friend that he was fine and didn't need the help. But he did need the help. His hand was trembling too much to make the handkerchief of any use, so he dropped his hand, tightening the grip on the cloth as it rested by his side.

The last several feet from the yard to their own room faded in and out. The only thing he seemed to be aware of was his inner monologue.

In through the nose for four.

Out through the mouth for four.

In through the nose for four.

Out through the mouth for four.

It was the same rhythmic pattern he would follow before a flight. Or after a bad one.

He blinked and found himself sitting on the bench seat next to their table.

"What can I do?" He heard Hambone say but it sounded like it was from a long ways away. Like he wasn't even in the room.

"Keep the rest of the guys out. Send them to the rec hall or something, just don't let them in here." That was Bucky. He sounded intense. Buck should probably snap out of it and get him to calm down. "Benny, get some water."

Gale blinked and found Bucky in front of his face. "Buck? Hey Gale, you with me?"

He wanted to say yes. He knew that it was technically the correct answer. But he couldn't get his tongue to move. He also suddenly found that he couldn't breathe.

It wasn't until now, in the relative quiet and privacy of the barracks that he realized that he had been scared. Freaking terrified. And his

body was just now giving him permission to fully react.

He'd been scared before. He'd had bad flights. Lost men. Gotten shot down. Captured. Then the rest of Bucky's crew had arrived but as the days trudged on, no word on his best friend.
He'd been scared before.

But nothing like this.

He didn't know what had happened. What had clicked. Felt different. But it was.

And he couldn't breathe.

"Gale, come on, look at me. Look at me!"

He obeyed, finding Bucky's worried eyes boring into him.

"Hey," His right hand was taken, the handkerchief falling to the floor, and pressed against Bucky's chest. "Hey you need to breathe for me. Come on, in for four, you know this."

Buck blinked, but he could feel the pulsing of Bucky's heart and the controlled rise and fall of his chest.

Right.

In for four.

Out for four.

His forehead found Bucky's shoulder, finding comfort and stability,

In for four.

Out for four.

It was like a rhythm.

Like flying.

In for four.

Out for four.

"Here."

Gale flinched back, head jerking up to find Benny holding out a cup of

water.

Feeling steadier than before, Gale untangled his hand from Bucky's, taking the cup in a shaky hand.

“I got it.” Bucky said softly, retrieving the water. “Go get the doc.”

“Bucky-” Gale began to protest, but Benny was already half out the door. “I’m okay.”

“Sure you are.”

“It’s just going to make them worry.”

“Well maybe they should.”

Gale’s eyes met Bucky’s and the concern he saw there opened something in his chest.

“Here.”

Buck reached out, grabbing the cup, but John didn’t release it, helping to guide it to Gale’s mouth.

“I’m sorry.” He said after pushing the water away.

“Don’t. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

A small quirk to his lips. “You weren’t even there when it started.”

“No but it doesn’t matter. It was a power play. They wanted to intimidate us.” He reached down and grabbed the handkerchief, dipping it in the water. Then looking directly into Gale’s eyes. “It didn’t work.” He wasn’t sure if that was an observation or an order.

The cloth came up and began to wipe away the blood.

“When did I hit my head?” He cringed at his own words, knowing that it further reinforced the fact that he was far from okay.

“The Kraut with the gun.” The pressure used to wipe away the blood increased, but Gale didn’t react. “He wouldn’t let you go. Even when the other one told him to. The gun was so tight to your head it left a dang circle imprint.”

“It scraped me when I fell.”

He grunted affirmatively. “Most of the bleeding has stopped now. It don’t think it needs stitches but it’ll probably scar.”

What was one more souvenir from paradise?

They sat in silence after that. Buck slowly felt more like himself, Bucky slowly swiping away the blood. It wasn’t necessary. Gale could do it himself. And the medic was on his way. But it really wasn’t for him. John didn’t do well without something to do.

“What did they say to you?”

“Hm?” Gale hadn’t even realized he’d closed his eyes until he was opening them again.

“The guard. He said something to you. What was it?”

A whooshing sound came from somewhere and he could feel his heart rate pick up.

He let out a breath, hoping it was disguised as an amused laugh. “Nothin’ important.”

“Come on Buck, you need-” whatever he was going to say was cut off by the door opening.

The camp medic wasn’t a trained doctor. If something was really bad they could go to one. But it was easier to keep things in house. To avoid the aid station and keep things off the official records.

“Let me see.” He said without preamble. Bucky moved to sit beside Gale on the bench, the doc taking his place. After examining his head, he nodded. “Shouldn’t need stitches. If it opens up or you start having head trouble let me know.”

“Check his wrist.” Bucky chimed in and Gale had almost forgotten about it. It had remained unmoving since arriving back in the bunkroom.

The doc frowned, taking the swollen hand in his own.

“It’s not broken.” Gale was quick to note. He’d had broken bones and he knew this wasn’t one. A sprain maybe. But more than likely just a straining of the ligaments.

“It’s hard to tell with all the swelling. Hopefully it’s just bruised. Can you move your fingers?” Gale found himself relieved when the honest

answer to that question was yes.

The medic sighed. “I can wrap it but I don’t have anything to give you for the pain right now. Hopefully the Red Cross packages will be here soon.”

“That’s all right.” He hardly felt the pain right now he was so tired. “I’ve had worse.”

Bucky made a noise beside him, but Gale was too focused on not falling asleep to decipher it.

It was a struggle, but he made it through the doc’s ministering.

“Try not to use it too much. Get me if it worsens.” The last part was directed towards Bucky.

“Benny, see the doc out.” Was Bucky’s answer.

Gale’s lips twitched at the eyeroll given in response.

As soon as the door closed, John was on his feet. “Alright, here we go. To bed.”

“I’m fine.” But he didn’t even believe himself. Come to think of it, he wasn't completely sure the words came out of his mouth.

He was moved to his feet and was glad that someone else was doing all of the work. Gale was flying all engines feathered.

“Sleep. We'll talk about this tomorrow.”

Gale grunted. There was nothing to talk about. It was over now he was fine.

But sleep. Sleep sounded good.

His head hit the pillow and he was already halfway gone.

“You're not allowed to die.”

The words were spoken quietly while a think blanket was suddenly covering him.

“Just… just don't die.”

He wanted to answer the words. Respond to the words they weren't

supposed to say out loud.

He wanted to tell Bucky that they'd be fine. That they'd both make it out.

He wanted to make him promise that if Gale did ever die he wouldn't follow.

But his mouth wouldn't move and wrist was starting to hurt and there was still a strange ringing in his ears. Maybe all of that could wait for the morning.

End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! Would love to hear any thoughts you have!

I currently have this in a series because I have several stories in the same "universe" I want to write (I rambled about them on Tumblr if you are interested). It is currently titled "Throughout the Great War" but it may change. And yes, I am aware that 'The Great War' is technically World War I. I'm using it as a reference to the Taylor Swift song lol

If you are interested in more, feel free to subscribe to the series! Hope to write more soonish. Have a lot of Gale whump/angst things in mind.

I thrive on comments so any would be greatly appreciated! And please come say hi on Tumblr (@Trekkiehood) it is actually my favorite thing to get asks about my fanfics.

Much love and God bless,
Jamie

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!